

GUTKIND, LEE. KEEP IT REAL:
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT RESEARCHING AND WRITING
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Private and Public: The Range and Scope of Creative Nonfiction

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This may come as a surprise, since I am often referred to as "the godfather behind creative nonfiction" (so anointed by *Vanity Fair* magazine), but I don't know who actually coined the term "creative nonfiction." As far as I know, nobody knows exactly. I have been using it since the 1970s, although if we were to pinpoint a time when the term became "official," it would be 1983, at a meeting convened by the National Endowment for the Arts to deal with the question of what to call the genre as a category for the NEA's creative writing fellowships. Initially the fellowships bestowed grant money (seventy-five hundred dollars at the time; twenty thousand dollars today) only to poets and fiction writers, although the NEA had long recognized the "art" of nonfiction and been trying to find a way to describe the category so writers would understand what kind of work to submit for consideration.

"Essay" is the term used to describe this "artful" nonfiction, but it didn't really capture the essence of the genre for the NEA or lots of other folks experimenting in the field. Technically, scholars, critics, and academics of all sorts, as well as newspaper op-ed reporters, were writing "essays," although that was not the kind of work the NEA had in mind. "Journalism"

didn't fit the category either, although the anchoring element of the best creative nonfiction requires an aspect of reportage. For a while the NEA experimented with "belles-lettres," a misunderstood term that favors style over substance and did not capture the personal essence and foundation of the literature it was seeking. Eventually one of the NEA members in the meeting that day pointed out that a rebel in his English department was campaigning for the term "creative nonfiction." I was that rebel.

Although it sounds a bit affected and presumptuous, "creative nonfiction" precisely describes what the form is all about. The word "creative" refers simply to the use of literary craft in presenting nonfiction—that is, factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid manner. To put it another way, creative nonfiction writers do not make things up; they make ideas and information that already exist more interesting and often more accessible.

This general meaning of the term is basically acknowledged and accepted in the literary world; poets, fiction writers, and the creative writing community in general understand and accept the elements of creative nonfiction, although their individual interpretation of the genre's boundaries may differ. The essential point to acknowledge here is that there are lines, real demarcation points among fiction, which is or can be mostly imagination; traditional nonfiction (journalism and scholarship), which is mostly information; and creative nonfiction, which presents or treats information using the tools of the fiction writer while maintaining allegiance to fact.

There is, it is true, controversy over the legitimacy of creative nonfiction, both as a term and as a genre; it flares up regularly, perhaps even annually, every time a book like James

Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, which purported to be a memoir but contains fictionalized events, is unmasked. Such scandals seem to inspire frenzies among literary and cultural critics, an excuse for predictable (but nevertheless often satisfying) expressions of schadenfreude and sanctimonious pronouncements about Truth in Art.

Ultimately, this controversy over the form or the word is not only rather silly but moot; the genre itself, the practice of writing nonfiction in a dramatic and imaginative way, has been an anchoring element of the literary world for many years. George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon*, and Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* are classic creative nonfiction efforts, books that communicate information (reportage) in a scenic, dramatic fashion.

These four books represent the full spectrum of creative nonfiction: Baldwin's work is memoir and therefore more personal or inward, dealing with the dynamics of his relationship with his father and the burden of race in America; Wolfe's work is more journalistic or outward, capturing the lives of the early astronauts. *Death in the Afternoon* and *Down and Out in Paris and London* fall somewhere in between—personal, like memoir, but filled with information about bullfighting and poverty respectively. I often refer to this combination as the parallel narratives of creative nonfiction; there is almost always a "public" and a "private" story.

At one point in history this kind of writing gained popularity as the New Journalism, in large part because of Wolfe, who published a book of that title in 1973. In it, he declared that the New Journalism "would wipe out the novel as literature's main event." Gay Talese, in the introduction to *Fame and Obscurity*,

his landmark collection of profiles of public figures including Frank Sinatra, Joe DiMaggio, and Peter O'Toole, describes the New Journalism thus: "Though often reading like fiction, [it] is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage, although it seeks a larger truth than is possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organizational style of the older form."

This is perhaps creative nonfiction's greatest asset: It offers flexibility and freedom while adhering to the basic tenets of reportage. In creative nonfiction, writers can be poetic and journalistic simultaneously. Creative nonfiction writers are encouraged to utilize literary and even cinematic techniques, from scene to dialogue to description to point of view, to write about themselves and others, capturing real people and real life in ways that can and have changed the world. What is most important and enjoyable about creative nonfiction is that it not only allows but also encourages the writer to become a part of the story or essay being written. The personal involvement creates a special magic that alleviates the suffering and anxiety of the writing experience; it provides many outlets for satisfaction and self-discovery, flexibility and freedom.

The Creative Nonfiction Police

Many writers have come to creative nonfiction seeking more freedom than is usually allowed by the narrow confines of traditional journalism, which not only demands a certain form, usually measured in inches, but sometimes requires that writers suppress their hard-earned expertise in a topic to maintain an appropriate detachment, or "objectivity." Yet journalists hardly

constitute the majority of creative nonfiction writers. One of the major reasons for the sudden and growing popularity of the genre is that poets and fiction writers have also entered into it with great enthusiasm, experimenting with and pushing the parameters of the form. The long list of respected poets and novelists who have written landmark books and essays in creative nonfiction includes Norman Mailer, Diane Ackerman, William Styron, and W. S. Merwin, as a barest beginning. Without endorsement and experimentation by writers whose reputation was made in other genres, creative nonfiction could not have grown at the astounding rate it has. Since the early 1990s there has been an explosion of creative nonfiction. Many of our best magazines—the *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*—publish more creative nonfiction than fiction and poetry combined. Every year more universities in the United States and throughout the world offer Master of Fine Arts degrees in creative nonfiction.

All this flexibility—writers crossing genres, applying tools from poetry and fiction to true stories, the connection between the personal and the public—has made some people, writers of creative nonfiction included, uncomfortable and confused. I often give talks to groups of students and other aspiring writers. Invariably, people in the audience ask questions about what writers can or can't do, stylistically and in content, while writing creative nonfiction. The freedom provided by the expanded boundaries is perplexing. The questioners are unrelenting: "How can you be certain that the dialogue you are remembering and re-creating from an incident that occurred months ago is accurate?"; "How can you look through the eyes of your characters if you are not inside their heads?"

I always answer as best I can. I try to explain that such ques-

tions have a lot to do with a writer's ethical and moral boundaries and, most important, how hard writers are willing to work to achieve accuracy and believability in their narratives. Making up a story or elaborating extemporaneously on a situation that did, in fact, occur can be interesting but unnecessary. Truth is often more compelling to contemplate than fiction. But the questions and the confusion about what a writer can or cannot do often persist—for too long.

Once, at a college in Texas, I finally threw up my hands in frustration and said, "Listen, I can't answer all these questions with rules and regulations. I am not," I announced, pausing rather theatrically, "the creative nonfiction police!"

There was a woman in the audience—someone I had noticed earlier during my reading; she was in the front row: hard to miss—older than most of the undergraduates, blond, attractive, in her late thirties maybe. She had the alert yet composed look of a nurse, a person only semirelaxed, always ready to act or react. She had taken off her shoes and propped her feet on the stage. I remember how her toes wiggled as she laughed at the essay I had been reading.

When I made my dramatic announcement, this woman suddenly jumped to her feet, whipped out a badge, and pointed in my direction. "Well, I am," she announced. "Someone has to be. And you are under arrest."

Then she scooped up her shoes and stormed barefooted from the room. The Q and A ended soon after, and I rushed into the hallway to find the woman with the badge. I had many questions, beginning with "Who the hell are you? Why do you have a badge? And how did you know what I was going to say when I didn't have any idea?" I had never used the term "creative nonfiction police" before that moment. But she was gone.

My host said the woman was a stranger. We asked around, but no one knew her. She was a mystery to everyone, especially me, and remains so to this day.

The Five Rs

The bigger mystery, however, then and now, is the debate that triggered my symbolic arrest, the set of parameters that govern or define creative nonfiction and the questions writers must consider while laboring in or struggling with what some call the literature of reality.

I meant what I said to that audience—I am not the creative nonfiction police—but working on the journal *Creative Nonfiction* means that my staff and I have had to make many decisions about where its parameters lie. And so, although we won't lay down the law, we will define some of the essential elements of creative nonfiction.

Basic public education once covered the three Rs: reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. I find it's helpful to think of the basic tenets of creative nonfiction in a similar manner, with the addition of two more Rs.

The first R is the real-life aspect of the writing experience. As a writing teacher I design assignments that have an immersion aspect. I force my students out into their communities for an hour, a day, or even a week so that they see and understand that the foundation of good writing is personal experience. I've sent my students to police stations, bagel shops, golf courses; together my classes have gone on excursions and participated in public service projects, all in an attempt to experience, and to re-create from experience, real life.

Which is not to say that all creative nonfiction has to involve

the writer's immersion into the experiences of others. Some writers (and students) may utilize their own personal experiences. In one introductory course I taught, a young man working his way through school as a salesperson wrote about selling shoes, while another student, who served as a volunteer in a hospice, captured a dramatic moment of death, grief, and family relief.

Not only were these essays, and many others my students have written over the years, based on real life, but they also contained personal messages from writer to reader, which gave them extra meaning. "An essay is when I write what I think about something," students will often say to me. Which is true, to a certain extent, and also the source of the meaning of the second R, reflection. In creative nonfiction, unlike in traditional journalism, a writer's feelings and responses about a subject are permitted and encouraged. But essays can't just be personal opinion; writers have to reach out to readers in a number of different and compelling ways.

This reaching out is essential if a writer hopes to find an audience. *Creative Nonfiction* receives approximately three hundred unsolicited essays a month. The vast majority of these submissions are rejected, and one common reason is an overwhelming egocentrism. In other words, writers write too much about themselves and what they think without seeking a universal focus so that readers are properly and firmly engaged. Essays that are so personal that they omit the reader are essays that will never see the light of print. The overall objective of a writer should be to make the reader tune in, not out.

Another main reason *Creative Nonfiction* and many other journals and magazines reject essays is a lack of attention to another essential element of the creative nonfiction genre,

which is to gather and present information, to teach readers about a person, place, idea, or situation, combining the creativity of the artistic experience with the essential third R in the formula, research or reportage. Even the most personal essay is usually full of substantive detail about a subject that affects or concerns the writer.

Personal experience, research, and spontaneous intellectual discourse—an airing and exploration of ideas—are equally vital elements in creative nonfiction. Annie Dillard, another prominent creative nonfiction writer, takes great pains to achieve this balance in her work. In her first book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which won a Pulitzer Prize, and in her other books and essays, Dillard bombards her readers with factual information—minutely detailed descriptions of insects, botany and biology, history and anthropology—blended with her own feelings about life.

One of my favorite Dillard essays, "Schedules," focuses on the importance of writers working on a regular schedule rather than only intermittently. In this essay she discusses, among many other subjects, Hasidism, chess, baseball, warblers, pine trees, June bugs, writers' studios, and potted plants, as well as her own schedule and writing habits and those of Wallace Stevens and Jack London.

What I am saying is that the genre of creative nonfiction is open to anyone with a curious mind and a sense of self. The research phase actually launches and anchors the creative effort. Whether it is a book or essay I am planning, I always begin my quest in the library (or, increasingly, online), for three reasons. First, I need to familiarize myself with the subject. If I don't know much about it, I want to make myself knowledgeable enough to ask intelligent questions when I

begin interviewing people. If I can't display at least a minimal understanding of the subject about which I want to write, I will lose the confidence and support of the people who can provide me access to the experience.

Second, I want to assess my competition. What other essays, books, and articles have been written about this subject? Who are the experts, the pioneers, the most controversial figures? I want to find a new angle, not write a story similar to one that has already been written. Finally, how can I reflect on and evaluate a person, subject, or place unless I know all the contrasting points of view? Reflection may permit a certain amount of speculation but only when based on a solid foundation of knowledge.

This brings me to the fourth R, reading. Writers must read not only research material unearthed in the library but also the work of the masters of their profession. I have heard some very fine writers claim that they don't read too much anymore or that they don't read for long periods, especially during the time they are laboring on a lengthy writing project. But almost all writers have read the best writers in their field and are able to converse in great detail about their stylistic approaches and the intellectual content of their work, much as any good visual artist is able to discuss the work of Picasso, van Gogh, Michelangelo, and Warhol.

Finally, there's the fifth R, the 'riting, the most artistic and romantic aspect of the whole experience. The first four Rs relate to the nonfiction part of creative nonfiction; this last R is where writers get to create. Writing often happens in two phases: Usually there is an inspirational explosion at the beginning, a time when writers allow instinct and feeling to guide their fingers as they create paragraphs, pages, and even

entire chapters or complete essays. This is what art of any form is all about: the passion of the moment and the magic of the muse. I am not saying it always happens; it doesn't. Writing is a difficult labor in which a daily grind or struggle (ideally with a regular schedule, as Annie Dillard concludes) is necessary. But this first part of the experience—for most writers, most of the time—is rather loose and spontaneous and, therefore, more creative and fun. The second part of the writing experience, the craft part, which comes into play after your basic essay is written, is equally important and a hundred times more difficult.

The Building Blocks of Creative Nonfiction: Scene, Dialogue, Intimate Detail, and Other Essentials

The craft part means the construction of the essay (or chapter or even book): how the research, reflection, and real-life experience are arranged to make a story meaningful and important to readers.

The primary way this is accomplished in creative nonfiction is through the use of scene. In fact, one of the most obvious distinguishing factors between traditional journalism and creative nonfiction—or simply between ordinary prose and good, evocative writing—is the use of vignettes, episodes, and other slices of reality. The uninspired writer will tell the reader about a subject, place, or personality, but the creative nonfiction writer will show that subject, place, or personality in action.

A valuable element of scene is dialogue, people saying things to one another, expressing themselves. Collecting dialogue is one of the reasons writers immerse themselves at a police station, bagel shop, or zoo. It lets them discover what people have to

say spontaneously, not just in response to a reporter's questions.

Another technique that helps writers create scene may be described as intimate and specific detail. This is a lesson that writers of all genres need to know: The secret to making prose (or, for that matter, poetry) memorable—and therefore vital and important—is to catalog with specificity the details that are most intimate. By “intimate,” I mean ideas and images that readers won't easily imagine, ideas and images you have observed that symbolize a memorable truth about the characters or the situations about which you are writing. “Intimate” means recording and noting details that the reader might not know or even imagine without your particular insight. Sometimes intimate detail can be so specific and special that it becomes unforgettable in the reader's mind.

A very famous “intimate” detail appears in a classic creative nonfiction profile, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” written by Gay Talese in 1962 and published in *Esquire*. In this profile, Talese leads readers on a whirlwind cross-country tour, revealing Sinatra and his entourage interacting with one another and with the rest of the world and demonstrating how Sinatra's world and the world inhabited by everyone else often collide. The scenes are action-oriented; they contain dialogue and evocative description, including a moment when Talese spotted a gray-haired lady with two hatboxes in the shadows of the Sinatra entourage and put her in the story. She was, it turned out, the guardian of Sinatra's collection of toupees. This tiny detail, Sinatra's wig lady, made such an impression when I first read the essay that even now, years later, anytime I see Sinatra on television or in rerun movies or spot his photo in a magazine, I find myself searching the background for the gray-haired lady with the hatbox.

The gray-haired lady was a detail that readers wouldn't have known about if Talese hadn't shown it to them, and her constant presence there in the shadows, hovering to service or replace Sinatra's toupee, offered important insight into Sinatra's character. And although we can't achieve such symbolism each time we capture an incident, writers who want their words to be remembered beyond the dates on which their stories are published or broadcast will seek to discover the special observations that symbolize the intimacy they have attained with their subjects.

Of course, all these vividly told scenes have to be organized according to some larger plan to make a complete story. We call this plan, or structure, the frame of the story. The frame represents a way of ordering or controlling a writer's narrative so that the elements of his book, article, or essay are presented in an interesting and orderly fashion with an interlaced integrity from beginning to end.

The most basic frame is a simple beginning-to-end chronology, a story that begins at one point and ends at a later point. For a variety of reasons, however, writers often choose not to frame their stories in a strictly chronological sequence. Starting a story in the middle of events can draw readers in and heighten suspense. However the frame is organized, it should help readers identify the main themes, or focus, of the story.

Keep It Real

Finally, harder to define than the elements of craft are all the ethical and moral issues writers of creative nonfiction have to consider. This is actually the way *Keep It Real* started, the reason for its existence. The editors of *Creative Nonfiction*

were dismayed by the scandalous controversy over *A Million Little Pieces* and the debacle that followed. Of course, this was not the first time such a brouhaha over truth and accuracy in nonfiction writing had erupted. Some of us remember the debate over the legitimacy of the work of Edmund Morris, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer who, while writing the authorized biography of Ronald Reagan, created himself as a fictional character in order to flesh out Reagan's hidden and puzzling personality. To be fair, Morris was not misleading his readers; his act of fictionalizing himself was made clear in the text of *Dutch*. This decision, however, to publish an authorized biography as a fictionalized memoir, created an uproar that was covered in the *New York Times*, on *60 Minutes*, and elsewhere.

Each time a new controversy rages I cringe, for the media tend to indict the genre or the form along with the individual violators of the basic line between fiction and nonfiction. So much of this revolves around individual personal and moral ethical parameters. From Morris's point of view, he was doing his best to reveal the three-dimensional aspects of the historical figure he was attempting to portray. He was upfront with his breach of form; the media responded, as is often the case, in an overly rambunctious manner, turning an interesting literary experiment into an opportunity to pontificate.

To be fair, the examination of the ethical boundaries in Morris's case was thorough and, to a certain extent, valuable in that the inherent problem in creative nonfiction, violating the line between truth and imagination, was delineated and discussed. The controversy over Frey, probably because of Oprah Winfrey's active engagement, was over the top, a fact that motivated us at *Creative Nonfiction* to prepare a special issue,

"A Million Little Choices," to lay out guidelines for the genre, presenting questions, controversies, and conflicts for writers and readers to consider.

As soon as the issue was published, the immediate and overwhelmingly positive response told us that we had addressed a need and satisfied a growing unrest about the dos and don'ts of the form. *Keep It Real* expands upon the original journal issue and includes even more topics.

Keep It Real was a group effort. In order to be thorough and to isolate and explain the aspects of the genre that trigger so many questions and so much concern, we reached out to a network of great writers and editors and knowledgeable experts in the field. These contributors present a range of opinions and ideas about creative nonfiction. We do not mean to suggest that they are a hardbound set of rules, simply that these are issues writers ought to consider when working in this genre.

As much as I would like to take credit as the founder of the form or the term, creative nonfiction is an art form that is defined by all the people who write it. In the end the literature that is created defines itself, and as writers push the boundaries and experiment with imaginative daring, the definition and the guidelines will change. Art, as we know it, is always in flux. That is what makes the process of writing both challenging and eminently and consistently worthwhile.